

Agriculture Committee Hearing on HR 4200
Statement of Congressman Brian Baird
December 7, 2005

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and thank you for holding a hearing on this important legislation. I also thank the Ranking Member, Mr. Peterson. I know you both are cosponsors of the bill and I appreciate the confidence you have placed in it. I also appreciate your holding a hearing to learn even more about the topic.

I have been privileged to work closely with the gentleman next to me on this effort. With Mr. Walden's leadership, a comprehensive, bipartisan commonsense bill has been crafted. HR 4200 balances legitimate environmental needs with economic realities.

I support HR 4200 for a multitude of reasons, but the most important is simple; people use wood. We can either harvest this wood in an environmentally sensitive fashion, as this bill provides, or import it from countries without environmental safeguards. The clear cutting of a rainforest in South America for wood products leaves a much larger ecological footprint than a selective harvest in a post-catastrophic area.

In drafting this bill, we fully recognize that harvest and reforestation are not without environmental impacts, and we have included extensive measures to address and minimize those impacts. These sideboards, which I anticipate others will elaborate on, include a prohibition against industrial style replanting, strong protection for green trees, and full compliance with environmental laws.

The essence of the bill is the establishment of an accelerated, science based process that includes opportunity for public input, in order to determine how to respond to catastrophic fires or other events that have killed large areas of federal forest. It should be emphasized under our bill, the decision of whether or not to take action is to be guided by science and by professional biologists and foresters, with opportunity for public input. There is no mandate for harvest of any sort and a host of existing environmental standards must be met if any harvest is to be allowed.

We believe a more rapid decision process is necessary because wood begins to degrade immediately after such catastrophic events and if any commercial value is to be obtained from harvest it must be done quickly. According to expert scientific testimony, prompt action including cross falling of timber and other measures, can help reduce erosion and damage that might be caused if interventions are delayed. Furthermore, because smaller, younger trees degrade most rapidly, prompt harvest allows these trees to be utilized for economic purposes, thereby taking some pressure off the potential harvest of larger trees.

Others can and will address the exact processes established in the bill and the environmental sideboards it includes. I would just like to take a minute to elaborate on one provision, the pre-approved management practices. This idea came from a paper I read by Dr. Jerry Franklin, where he made mention of the particular needs of, what he called, plant association groups.

Under the normal, public rulemaking process and using peer reviewed science, the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture will determine what harvest, restoration and reforestation practices are appropriate in different areas. These practices will factor in forest type, slope, habitat and watershed needs, and the necessity of snag retention. Once established, these environmentally and scientifically sound practices will allow us to take fast action after a catastrophic event. Over time, we will have a comprehensive best practices guide to our nation's forests. My hope is that these practices can serve as a model for states and private landowners.

I would also like to acknowledge an area of the bill that will require the cooperation of the Executive Branch and Congressional Appropriators. The bill provides for a number of funding mechanisms, and I know Mr. Walden is working to buttress this section further. I would like to emphasize how important it is that the Wildland Fire Management budget line be fully funded. In fiscal year 2006, Wildland Fire Management will receive 8% less than in fiscal year 2005. For HR 4200 to work, there needs to be an increase, not a decrease, in funding.

In conclusion, I thank my colleague Mr. Walden from the state of Oregon, acknowledge the fine work of my colleague from South Dakota, Ms. Herseth, and again thank the Chairman for this important hearing.